



CAMBRIDGE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Date: December 3, 2012
To: Members of the Historical Commission
From: Sarah L. Burks, Preservation Planner
Re: D-1286: 156-158 Cushing Street (1898)

An application to demolish the three decker at 156-158 Cushing Street was received on November 13, 2012. The applicant was notified of an initial determination of significance, and a public hearing was scheduled for December 6, 2012.

Site

The three-family residence is located on the west side of Cushing Street near the corner of Vineyard Street in the Strawberry Hill neighborhood of Cambridge. It is a frame building on a brick foundation. The assessed value for the land and building



(Map 257/Parcel 26) is \$665,700. The structure is sited on a 3,805 square-foot lot in a Residence B zone. This is a residence-only zone, which allows two-family and townhouse construction. The zone permits an FAR of 0.35 and requires a minimum of 2,500 square feet lot area per dwelling unit. The zone has a height limit of 35 feet.

The existing conditions of the site include a trapezoidal lot that measures approximately 45 feet wide and varies in depth from 76 to 91 feet deep. The existing building is oriented parallel to the street, and diagonally across the lot. The building measures approximately 26 feet wide by 43 feet long, not including porches. There is little green space with a concrete driveway on the south and small rear yard.

The proposal is to demolish the three decker and build a new three decker of approximately the same size, but oriented squarely with the side and rear lot lines. A driveway would still be located to the south of the building.

Architectural Description

The building at 156-158 Cushing Street is a 3-story, flat-roofed three decker on a partially-parged brick foundation. The residence is two bays wide with the entry hall located at the left and a projecting three-sided bay on the right. The entry porch is not original and consists of a simple shed roof, wrought iron posts and railings, and a concrete deck and steps. The house is sided with aluminum siding.



156-158 Cushing St.

staff photo, Nov. 2012

The windows are symmetrically placed but the sash are recent vinyl or aluminum replacements in a 1-over-1 double hung pattern instead of the original 2-over-2. The

cornice trim has been boxed, but originally had wood dentil details. The two front doors are recent steel or aluminum replacements.

Current Condition

The current condition of the building appears good, but the applicant has provided information about a failing foundation attributed to inadequate bearing conditions of the underlying soil.

History

Cushing Street was named for a large property owner in Belmont, John Perkins Cushing, whose 200-acre estate, "Bellmont," gave its name to the town. The east side of Cushing Street was owned by Francis L. Batchelder and heirs, before being subdivided for the Strawberry Hill development. Batchelder was a Boston attorney, who resided on Phillips Place in Cambridge.

The Cushing Street neighborhood was originally part of Watertown. The first scheme for development was a real estate venture in the 1840s east of Cushing Street called Strawberry Hill. The opening of omnibus service to Harvard Square in 1845 and the Watertown Branch railroad station in 1846 brought the neighborhood a modest popularity. The area was set off from Watertown to the new town of Belmont in 1859. In 1880, a total of 0.89 square miles of Belmont was annexed to Cambridge as part of an effort by the City of Cambridge to protect the surroundings and water supply of Fresh Pond.

Initially, the neighborhood was envisioned as a suburb for wealthy Bostonians; "Strawberry Hill" was the name of the subdivision platted by Alexander Wadsworth, designer of Mount Auburn Cemetery, in 1847. The area failed to prosper, however, and after 1860, deed restrictions were relaxed, many of the 15,000 square foot lots were subdivided and made available to Irish laborers. During the 1860s, approximately a dozen houses were built along Cushing and Holworthy streets, a process that continued into the early 1870s. The Town of Belmont erected a schoolhouse on Cushing Street in 1872. Further growth was halted by the Panic of 1873, but the pattern of modest single and double houses was continued when building resumed in the mid 1880s.

Residential construction in the Cushing Street neighborhood increased after 1880, and by 1910 the area was almost completely developed. The filling of Bird's Pond to the west of Cushing Street promised additional development, although this did not materialize until after World War II with the construction of the Corcoran Park veterans' apartments. In recent years, the neighborhood has seen a few construction projects, the largest of which was the reconstruction of the Haggerty School in 1994.

Demolition and new construction of the houses at 101, 127, and 186 Cushing Street has occurred since 2000.



156-158 Cushing St.

staff photo, Nov. 2012

Carpenter Gilbert G. Downey, who hailed from New Brunswick, Canada, pulled a building permit to construct the residence in 1897. He was both the owner and builder of the three decker. Downey built several properties in Cambridge between 1896 and 1898 including other multi-family dwellings in the Strawberry Hill neighborhood: 26-28 Holmes Street (1898), 85-89 Holworthy Street (1898), and 77-79 Park Avenue (1898). Downey resided on Kinnaird Street in Cambridgeport. After 1900, Downey no longer appears in the Cambridge city directories.

Subsequent owners generally resided in one unit and rented out the other two. These owners included Pietro Crupi, a laborer, Joseph V. Sacco, a rubber worker, and Giuseppe Borelli, on the maintenance staff at Harvard University. Other owners held the property purely as an investment and lived elsewhere including Joseph C. Mann and Anthony Colosimo. As seen in the above list, the Strawberry Hill neighborhood was home to many Italian immigrant families, and is still home today to the St. Lucia hall and the Festival of St. Lucia held annually in September.

Many of the residents at this address were employees of the Hood Rubber Company in Watertown. The company was a major employer of residents in this area of Cambridge.

Significance and Recommendation

The three decker at 156-158 Cushing Street is significant as a characteristic example of this variant of the side hall residence, unique to the Boston area. The building's construction exhibits associations with the broad architectural history of the City as one of several buildings built by the Canadian native, Gilbert G. Downey. Its relationship to resident employees of the Hood Rubber Company is indicative of the neighborhood's later phase of development and history as a suburban enclave of West Cambridge and the many Irish and later Italian American families that made their home in the Strawberry Hill neighborhood. It is the staff recommendation that the structure be found significant for these reasons.

The condition of the house may be a factor in its viability for renovation vs. reconstruction. The proponents can provide further information about their exploration of renovation options.

cc: Joseph & Theresa Borelli
Anthony Borelli
Maggie Booz, Smart Architecture